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## COLUMNS OF INFAMY

By ROBERT FLETCHER

SOME years ago Rear-Admiral Greer, of the United States Navy, who had recently been in command of the Mediterranean squadron, told me that while in Genoa he observed, in a desolate spot, a stone pillar that excited his curiosity. There was an inscription on it, and in reply to his inquiries he was told that it was "*Colonna d'infâmia*"—a column of infamy. No one could tell him anything of its origin, or of the person whose memory it was intended to dishonor. He visited the place a second time, and made a very careful copy of the inscription, which was in Latin, and of which some of the letters had been partly defaced by time or accident. This copy he kindly sent to me, and I devoted some time to the study of the broken letters, succeeding finally in restoring the inscription to my satisfaction. The literal translation is this:

"Let the memory of that most wicked man, Julius Cæsar Vachero, be forever infamous, who, as he had conspired against the Republic, suffered righteous punishment by the severing of his head from his body, the confiscation of his possessions, the banishment of his sons, and the demolition of his house, in the year of Salvation, 1628."

If put in corresponding lines in homely English, it would read thus:

Curses upon the name bestow  
Of Julius Cæsar Vachero;  
Who 'gainst his country dared conspire,  
And lost his head by righteous ire;  
His wealth confiscate, sons expelled,  
No stone remains of where he dwelled.

I could find nothing about this luckless Vacchero in any work on Italy, excepting a brief notice of the conspiracy in Sismondi's *History of the Italian Republics*. Neither was there any reference to the pillar in any of the guide-books or descriptions of Genoa which I was able to consult. Clearly this was a case where the poet's line was applicable:

‘Monuments themselves memorials need.’

I ascertained from the Catalogue of Books in the British Museum that in the *Archivio storico d'Italia*, a collection of historical documents of great rarity and importance, extending to nearly a hundred volumes, there is an account of this Vacchero conspiracy. Fortunately, a copy of this invaluable publication is in the Library of Congress, where it is considered to be one of the special treasures of the historical department. I have, with some care, examined its history of the conspiracy, the account of which extends through a hundred pages of the *Archivio*. The following is a very brief sketch of the affair which ended so fatally for its prime mover and held his name up to infamy for nearly three hundred years.

It is usual to speak of Italian history in the 12th and 13th centuries as that of the Free Cities; in the 14th and 15th centuries as the Age of Despots, to use Symonds' curt phrase; and in the 16th and 17th centuries as the period of foreign intrigue and domination. Genoa had passed through an experience like that of the other great Italian cities. In 1528 Andrea Doria, one of her most distinguished sons, succeeded in restoring her liberties to a certain extent, and the republic was established, with a Doge at its head. The tyranny of the son of the great admiral Giannetto Doria wrought many changes in the form of government, and at the time now spoken of the affairs of the state were practically controlled by an oligarchy consisting of certain families whose names were enrolled in what was known as the "Golden Book."

The Genoese, always a bold and rather turbulent people, were devoted to mercantile pursuits and the delights of money-making. In the fine arts their work bore no comparison with the achievements of Florence, Milan, or Rome. In public works of utility and magnificence, Genoa displayed grandeur and invention. Her harbors were protected by a gigantic mole, and a superb aqueduct brought water into the city from the Ligurian Alps.

Their reputation for greed and covetousness, combined with great audacity and courage, made the names of its citizens somewhat of a byword throughout Europe, and even in the last century Rivarol said of them: "Anywhere if you see a Genoese throw him-

self out of a fourth story window, do not hesitate to follow him—there will certainly be fifty per cent. to be made by it!"

At the time of the conspiracy of Vacchero, in 1628, the government, nominally a republic with a Doge at its head, was actually under the control of the 170 families whose names were inscribed in the Golden Book and who alone had the right to sit in council. There were at least 450 families equally noble, and possessed of vast hereditary estates and dignities, who were excluded from all power.

The "Act of mediation," as it was termed, was an agreement between Andrea Doria and the new republic which he established in his native city, by which the government was to be composed of those whose names were inscribed in the Golden Book. The act provided that there should be a yearly addition to this book of ten families—seven from the city of Genoa and three from the two Rivas. The dominant rulers contrived to elude the consequences of this provision. They selected unmarried men without the potency of family connections, or poor men who could not compete in influence with the wealthy members of the council. The Doge was selected from their own class, and the government of the city and the state was thus absolutely under their control. The arrogance of these dominant rulers was a continual source of displeasure to the nobles and merchants who were not their associates. When a member of the council appeared in the market place, all hats were to be doffed to him. When, as often happened, he was a man possessed of no great wealth or dignity, the haughty nobles of long descent, and the wealthy burghers, were exasperated to the highest degree at the humiliation imposed upon them. A trifling event connected with this custom drove Giuliano Fornari, a fiery young noble, into the conspiracy with Vacchero.

Julius Cæsar Vacchero was the son of a merchant of Genoa. He followed his father's occupation, and, by his shrewdness and daring, acquired a very large fortune. He was known as "*Mercedante richissimo*," the richest merchant of Genoa. He was a man of sombre disposition, somewhat affecting the Spaniard in his demeanor, for there was a strong Spanish party at that time in

Genoa. In his later years he always wore armor, and his palace was filled with retainers, "*bravos*" in the language of the day. This personal following was not at all unusual. It was retained only by the capacity to support these hirelings, whose daggers were always ready to avenge an affront offered their master, and the influence and wealth of the latter, assisted by the venality of the tribunals, generally sufficed to protect the assassin.

Vacchero's wife was Hippolita Rela, of a distinguished Genoese family. She was a high-spirited, noble lady, of whom her husband was proud and fond. In the hour of trial she showed herself worthy of his love.

Bitter epigrams were circulated, in which Vacchero's character was not spared, and, what stung his haughty temper more than all, his wife's fair fame was sneeringly traduced.

Charles Emmanuel, the reigning Duke of Savoy, had claims on Genoa which he was anxious to enforce. Knowing the influence which Vacchero's forcible character and immense wealth exercised, he opened communications with him by means of an adventurer known as the Count Ansaldo. An interview took place under extreme precautions of secrecy, and the part which the Duke was to assume in the event of the success of the conspiracy was arranged.

In the meantime, Vacchero sought by every means in his power to associate with him in his complot against the hated government such members of the families excluded from the Golden Book as were able to bring armed followers to his aid. He spent money lavishly among the poorer citizens, that he might attach them to him, and he increased his already large retinue of *bravos*.

The plan of the conspiracy was this: On the morning of the first of April, 1628, they were to attack the Public Palace, slay the German guards, and put to death the members of the Council. The government was then to be reorganized, under the protection of the Duke of Savoy, with Vacchero at its head as Doge.

As the momentous day approached, there were many dissensions among the conspirators. Vacchero desired to expel the tyrannical oligarchs and to establish the protectorate of the Duke of Savoy.

Fornari and his adherents had more selfish and less lofty purposes, and proposed to re-form the government after their own views. The leaders of the companies of soldiers and *bravos* cared only for the prospect of booty from the sack of the opulent city. It is not surprising that among such discordant elements one man should be found ready to play the traitor's part for the sake of gain. A Piedmontese captain, one Giacomo Ruffo, on the night of the 30th of March, obtained an audience of the ruling powers, and revealed the plot with the names of all the conspirators.

The Doge and Council were well nigh frantic with rage and fear. They got together their guards and followers, but they did not venture to attack Vacchero's palace, full, as it was, of armed men with so daring a leader. The preparations of the government soon made it evident that the plot had been discovered, and the leading conspirators fled from the city. It became a race with those who were captured as to who should be foremost in confessing all, and more than all, of the particulars of the complot. Everything was laid to the charge of Vacchero. He was the great tempter, the head and front of the conspiracy, and a reward of 4,000 crowns was offered for his capture.

Finding himself deserted by his friends and allies, he escaped from Genoa in disguise, and took refuge in a small country house, home of the parents of one of his humble followers. They, alarmed for the safety of their son, went out in the night and consulted with a neighbor as to the advisability of giving up the arch conspirator. The neighbor, an astute fellow, described as a "practitioner," whatever that may mean, quieted the old couple, and betook himself with all possible speed to Genoa, and offered to betray the hiding place of Vacchero to the authorities in consideration of the payment of the offered reward and a further promise of immunity for two conspirators. The terms were agreed to and one of the pardons thus obtained was given to the young peasant, the follower of Vacchero. The adroit "practitioner" had the audacity to sell the other pardon for the sum of 4,000 crowns to Fornari, one of the leading conspirators. The man's double-dealing was discovered and punished, and it would seem that the pardon thus dearly bought was

disavowed by the authorities, for in Del Torre's list of those who were tried, with their sentences, after Fornari's name comes the fatal word *decapitato*.

Vacchero, with twenty-two of his fellow conspirators, were speedily brought to trial. The Duke of Savoy, with much insistence, demanded their release, and boldly declared himself as the head of the conspiracy. Vacchero's wife, sons, and followers were all imprisoned. Hippolita, undismayed by the threat of torture, the ruin of her family, and the prayers of her father and mother, defied the judges to the last, and refused to betray any of the secrets of her husband. Of what became of the brave woman after the execution of her lord, the demolition of her palace, and the banishment of her sons, nothing is told. It seems certain that the sons were only boys, for if they had been young men, coming of such blood, they certainly would have figured in the list of conspirators. Let us hope that, with such a mother, the banished did not become bandits after the fashion of the time. The two words come from the same root—the *ban*—the proclamation which banished the criminals seldom failed to drive them into becoming *bandits*.

Of those who were tried, some were beheaded and others were sentenced to imprisonment for life. No details are given of the execution of Vacchero, except the simple word *decapitato* following his name, which leads the fatal list. The historian, Del Torre, gives what he calls the "epitaph," which, it is interesting to know, corresponds almost precisely with the inscription copied by Admiral Greer. The only variation is in the spelling of the name of Vacchero. In the "epitaph" and throughout the historical sketch the name is spelt with two c's, but in the inscription on the pillar, with only one.

We know from this latter source that Vacchero was beheaded, his vast possessions were confiscated to the state, his sons were expelled from Genoa and forbidden to return, his palace was razed to the ground, and a pillar of stone erected on the site in eternal reprobation of his treason.

We must judge Vacchero in the light of his own time. The

annals of Italy abound in just such daring attempts as his to seize the supreme control of the great cities. Had he succeeded, he might have figured in history with the Dorias, Sforzas, and Medici—he failed, and there is only the column of infamy to record his name. The history of the Italian republics in medieval and later times was, in fact, a history of successful and unsuccessful treasons, and Sir John Harrington's famous epigram might have been well applied to them. No one age can fairly judge of what circumstances in another age would justify revolt. There comes a time when it is humanity, and not rights or charters, which is involved, and then we can join with the poet and say:

"The traitor to humanity is the traitor most accursed;  
Man is more than constitutions; better rot beneath the sod,  
Than be true to Church and State, while we are doubly false to God!"

*List of works collected by Alessandro Manzoni relating to the foregoing subject, commencing with his own work.*<sup>1</sup>

I promessi sposi, storia milanese del secolo XVII scoperta e rifatta Edizione riveduta dall' Autore. Storia della colonna infame inedita. Milano, dalla tipografia Guglielmini e Redaelli, 1840-42. 8°, fig., 832 pag.

Illustrata con disegni di F. Gonin, Massimo d'Azeglio, L. Bisi, ecc. Storia della colonna infame. Edizione accresciuta dalle Osservazioni sulla tortura di Pietro Verri. Lugano, tipografia della Svizzera italiana, 1843. 16°, 284 pag.

Storia della colonna infame. Napoli, 1843 (nello stabilimento tipografico Capasso). 12°, 143 pag.

Storia della colonna infame. Napoli, per Gaetano Nobile libraio-editore, 1843. 16°, 172 pag., con ritratto.

Storia della colonna infame. Palermo, Frascò Barbera, Clamis e Roberti editori, 1843. 16°, 111 pag.

Storia della colonna infame di Alessandro Manzoni, aggiuntovi il Cinque maggio dello stesso autore. Napoli, si vende da Giosuè Rondinella, 1843. 16°, 120 pag.

Storia della colonna infame. Palermo, presso Federico Garofalo, 1843. 12°, 108 pag.

Storia della colonna infame. Edizione alla quale furono aggiunte, come appendice, le Osservazioni sulla tortura di Pietro Verri. Parigi, Baudry, Libreria europea, 1843. 12°, 367 pag.

WASHINGTON, D. C.

<sup>1</sup> From *Catalogo della Sala Manzoni*, 8°, Milano, 1890, pp. 23-24.